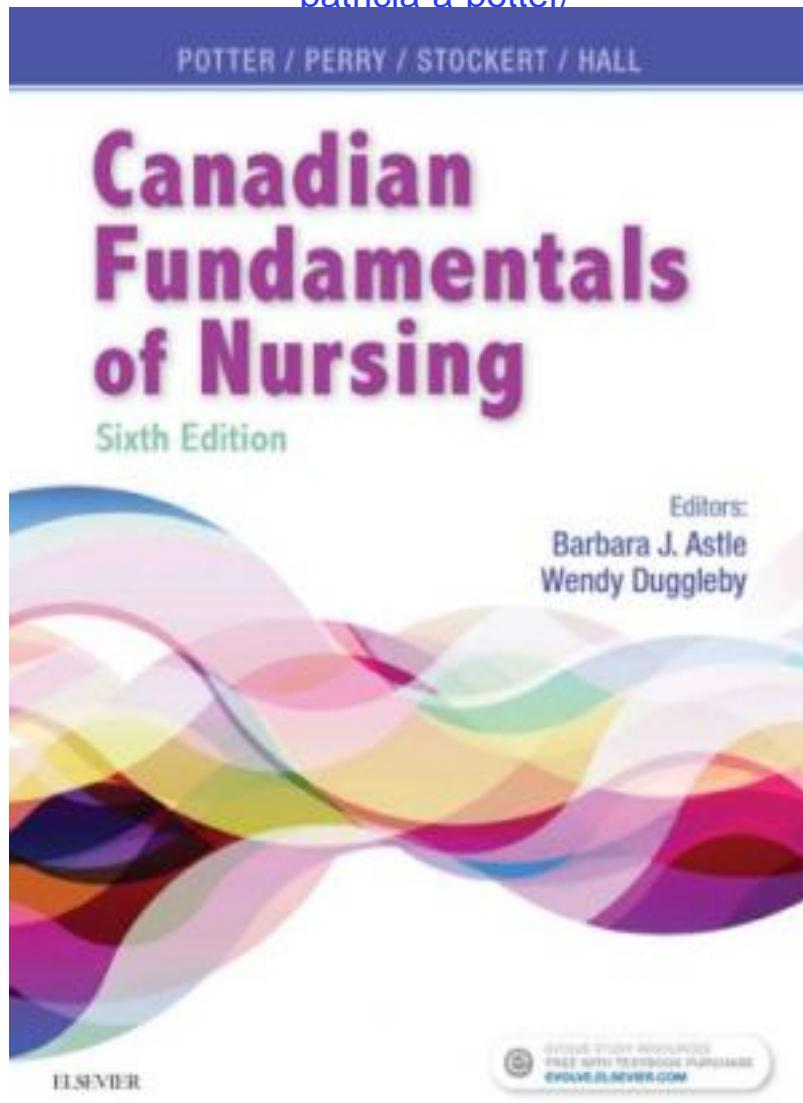


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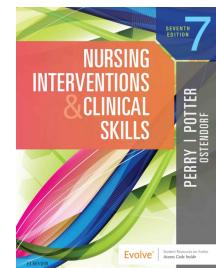
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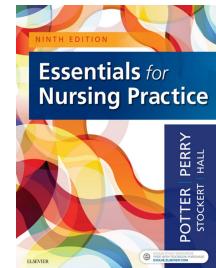
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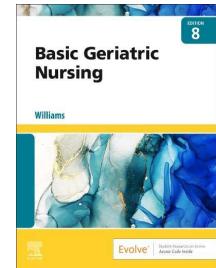
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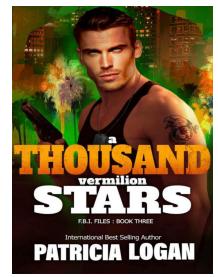
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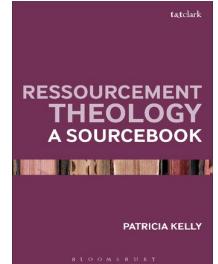
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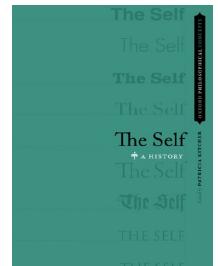
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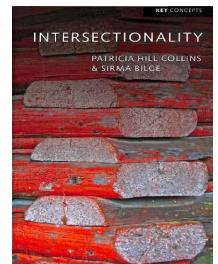
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Table of Contents

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Preface to the Student

Preface to the Instructor

Classic Features

New Features

Learning Supplements for Students

Teaching Supplements for Instructors

Multimedia Supplements for Instructors and Students

Acknowledgements

Contributors

Reviewers

Unit I Health and Health Care in Canada

1 Health and Wellness

Conceptualizations of Health

Historical Approaches to Health in Canada

Determinants of Health and Social Determinants of Health

Strategies to Influence Health Determinants

Health Promotion Strategies

Population Health Promotion Model: Putting It All Together

Summary

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

2 The Canadian Health Care Delivery System

Evolution of the Canadian Health Care System

Organization and Governance of Health Care

Health Care Spending

Trends and Reforms in Canada's Health Care System

Right to Health Care

Primary Health Care

Future of Primary Health Care

Settings for Health Care Delivery

Levels of Care

Challenges to the Health Care System

Nursing's Future in the Emerging Health Care System

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

3 The Development of Nursing in Canada

Why Nursing History Matters

Care of Strangers: the Early History of Nursing

Globalization and the Emergence of Modern Nursing

Nursing Education in Canada

Health Care and Educational Reform

Influence of Periods of Social Upheaval on Nursing

Conclusion

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

4 Community Health Nursing Practice

Promoting the Health of Populations and Community Groups

Community Health Nursing Practice

The Changing Focus of Community Health Nursing Practice

Community Assessment

Promoting Clients' Health

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

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[Review Questions](#)

[Recommended Websites](#)

[References](#)

Unit II Foundations of Nursing Practice

5 Theoretical Foundations of Nursing Practice

[Early Nursing Practice and the Emergence of Theory](#)

[Nursing Process](#)

[Conceptual Frameworks](#)

[Metaparadigm Concepts](#)

[Philosophy of Nursing Science](#)

[Ways of Knowing in Nursing Practice](#)

[Paradigm Debates Within Nursing](#)

[Nursing Diagnosis](#)

[Reflections on Conceptualizing Nursing](#)

[Major Theoretical Models](#)

[Theorizing in the Future](#)

[Key Concepts](#)

[Critical Thinking Exercises](#)

[Review Questions](#)

[References](#)

6 Evidence-Informed Practice

[Why Evidence?](#)

[Development of Nursing Knowledge](#)

[Researching the Evidence](#)

Integrate the Evidence

Evaluate the Practice Design or Change

Support for Evidence-Informed Practice

The Development of Research in Nursing

The History of Nursing Research in Canada

Nursing Research

Research Designs

Ethical Issues in Research

Applying Research Findings in Nursing Practice

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

7 Nursing Values and Ethics

Values

Ethics

Ethical Analysis and Nursing

Ethical Issues in Nursing Practice

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

8 Legal Implications in Nursing Practice

Legal Limits of Nursing

Legal Liability Issues in Nursing Practice

Legal Issues in Nursing Practice

Risk Management

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

9 Global Health

Global Health

Intersectionality

Cultural Diversity

Understanding Cultural Concepts

Historical Development of the Concept of Culture

Cultural Assessment

Global Health Nursing

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

10 Indigenous Health

Indigenous Diversity—the Canadian Perspective

Indigenous History in Canada

Cultural Orientations

Nursing Considerations and Indigenous Health

Illness Experiences—Chronic Diseases

Indigenous Health—the Global Perspective

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

11 Nursing Leadership, Management, and Collaborative Practice

Leadership Theories

Management and Leadership Roles for Nurses

Quality Care and Patient Safety

Leadership Skills for Nursing Students

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

Unit III Approaches to Nursing Care

12 Critical Thinking in Nursing Practice

Critical Thinking Defined

A Critical Thinking Model for Clinical Decision Making

Levels of Critical Thinking in Nursing

Components of Critical Thinking in Nursing

Critical Thinking Competencies

Developing Critical Thinking Skills

Critical Thinking Synthesis

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

13 Nursing Assessment, Diagnosis, and Planning

Critical Thinking Approach to Assessment

Assessment

Nursing Diagnosis

Critical Thinking and Nursing Diagnostic Process

Concept Mapping for Nursing Diagnoses

Sources of Diagnostic Errors

Nursing Diagnoses: Application to Care Planning

Planning

Establishing Priorities

Critical Thinking in Establishing Goals and Expected Outcomes

Written Plans of Care

Consulting Other Health Care Providers

Conclusion

Using the Nursing Process to Answer Multiple-Choice and Multiple-Response Exam Questions

Key Concepts

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

14 Implementing and Evaluating Nursing Care

Introduction

Implementation

Types of Nursing Interventions

Selection of Interventions

Critical Thinking in Implementation

Standard Nursing Interventions

Implementation Process

Direct Care

Indirect Care

Achieving Client-Centred Goals

Evaluation

Critical Thinking and Evaluation

Evaluation Process

Conclusion

Using the Nursing Process as a Guide for Exam Preparation for Test-Taking Strategies

The Nursing Process and Studying Disease Management

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

15 Documenting and Reporting

Purposes of Medical Records

The Shift to Electronic Documentation

Interprofessional Communication Within the Medical Record

Confidentiality

Interprofessional Communication Within the Health Care Team

Guidelines for Quality Documentation and Reporting

Methods of Documentation

Common Record-Keeping Forms

Acuity Rating Systems

Documentation in the Home Health Care Setting

Documentation in the Long-Term Health Care Setting

Documenting Communication With Providers and Unique Events

Information Management in Health Care

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

16 Nursing Informatics and Canadian Nursing Practice

Nursing Informatics and the Canadian Health Care System

Standards and Clinical Interoperability

Canadian Privacy Legislation

Informatics Competencies as a Strategic Direction

Clinician Engagement and Informatics Communities

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

Unit IV Working With Patients and Families

17 Communication and Relational Practice

Communication and Interpersonal Relationships

Developing Communication Skills

Levels of Communication

Basic Elements of the Communication Process

Forms of Communication

Professional Nursing Relationships

Elements of Professional Communication

Communication Within The Nursing Process

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

18 Patient-Centred Care

Jane Black's Story

Knowing

Thinking

Nursing Process

Clinical Judgement Model

Interacting

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

19 Family Nursing

What Is a Family?

Current Trends in the Canadian Family

The Family and Health

Family Nursing Care

Assessing the Challenges, Strengths, and Needs of the Family: The Calgary Family Assessment Model

Family Intervention: The Calgary Family Intervention Model

Interviewing the Family

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

20 Patient Education

Goals of Patient Education

Teaching and Learning

Domains of Learning

Basic Learning Principles

Integrating the Nursing and Teaching Processes

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

Unit V Caring Throughout the Lifespan

21 Developmental Theories

Growth and Development

Traditions of Developmental Theories

Organicism

Psychoanalytic and Psychosocial Tradition

Mechanistic Tradition

Contextualism

Dialecticism

Developmental Theories and Nursing

Key Concepts

Critical Thinking Exercises

Review Questions

Recommended Websites

References

22 Conception Through Adolescence

Selecting a Developmental Framework for Nursing

Conception

Transition From Intrauterine to Extrauterine Life

Newborn

Infant

Toddler

Preschooler

School-Age Children and Adolescents

School-Age Child

Adolescence

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CHAPTER XXIII

ALMOST CAUGHT

"My!" exclaimed Tavia, later. "There is a whole lot to making up a plot; isn't there? And how wise you are, Doro!"

"But you see, my child, you can't go ahead with this scheme as you first mapped it out," observed Dorothy, drily.

"Oh, I see," agreed her friend. "Mr. Somes can't arrest the man who calls himself 'John Smith.'"

"Of course not. Nor can anybody else arrest him. He has committed no crime in trying to get money for his information about Tom Moran."

"But how will you fix him?"

"You see, if Mr. Somes will allow the clerk at the general delivery window of the post-office to make some signal when a person comes to call for this letter I have written, we will have somebody on the watch to follow John Smith. Then we'll find out who he is——"

"If it *is* a 'he,'" interposed Tavia.

"Of course it *is*," returned her friend. "It's a man's handwriting. And a very bad, ignorant man, I am afraid."

"He doesn't belong to Dalton, then," declared Tavia, earnestly. "Since the liquor crusade, when the saloons were all shut, we

haven't had many men of bad character in Dalton."

"That's right," agreed Dorothy. "But you see, there is always a 'floating population.' Work such as your father's company is doing brings in irresponsible men from outside. They have no interest in the fair name of Dalton, so we mustn't be surprised if they misbehave," said sensible Dorothy.

"But who is going to watch all the time at the post-office?" demanded Tavia.

"The window for the delivery of letters is open from eight till eight. We'll get the boys to help us take turns. There are you and me, Johnny, Joe and Roger—even Roger isn't too little to follow the man and find out where he lives," said Dorothy, briskly. "Then we can pull my cousins, and Bob Niles, and Abe Perriton into it. That makes nine of us. Nine in twelve hours—What does nine in twelve make, Tavia?"

"One hour and twenty minutes each—*about*. Oh, all right!" exclaimed Tavia. "Of course we can watch. But the question is: Will that do any good?"

Dorothy would not listen to any croaking. She wrote the decoy letter, and the two girls went down town and saw Mr. Somes privately. He knew both Tavia's father and Major Dale; and when the girls from Glenwood disclosed to the postmaster just why they wished to find Tom Moran, and all about Celia, and the letter Dorothy had received from "John Smith," he agreed to help them.

It was arranged, however, that the letter should not be put in the mail until the following morning, so that the girls might fully arrange the "watch-and-watch" on the general delivery letter window.

Their boy friends fell into the scheme with alacrity. Dorothy and Tavia did not explain entirely their interest in Tom Moran, nor why

there was such a hue and cry after that red-haired young man; but

"It doesn't matter," said one of the lads, cheerfully. "If Dot says she wants to find the chap—and this fellow who wrote the bum letter—we'll do just what she says. Dot's all right, you know, fellows!"

But that very morning there came word over the telephone to Abe Perriton's house that started the excitement in a new quarter. A man named Polk, who ran a sawmill on Upper Creek, asked Mr. Perriton to hire several men in Dalton if he could, as he had work that must be rushed and he needed an extra force of hands.

"And I haven't been able to hire a soul up here, except Tom Moran, who came along last night. And I'm afraid he won't stay. He'll not promise to."

"Here, Abe," said Mr. Perriton. "Didn't I hear something about your friends wanting to see Tom Moran? He's up to Polk's mill."

That was enough. The boys started with the *Firebird* inside of ten minutes picking up Dorothy and Tavia on the way. But nobody thought to telephone to the mill man to ask him to hold the red-haired man until the *Firebird* party arrived.

It was over another rough road to Polk's mill on Upper Creek. "Dear, dear," complained Tavia, "I am half in doubt whether the geographers have got it right. Perhaps the world isn't round. I don't see how it can be when it is so awful bumpy!"

"You feel like Nat did, I guess," chuckled Ned. "That was when my lovely brother was a whole lot younger than he is now—hey, Nat?"

"What's the burn?" asked Nathaniel White, Esquire.

"Member when Miss Baker put the poser to you in intermediate school? 'Member about it, boy?"

"Oh, that's an old one," grunted Nat.

"Let's hear it—do," cried Dorothy. "Did Nattie miss his lesson?"

"He wasn't paying much attention, I reckon," said Ned, just scaling a corner post as they took a turn, and scaring a squawking flock of hens almost into "nervous prosperity," as Tavia called it. "Miss Baker was giving us fits in the physical geography line. She snaps one at Nat:

"What's the shape of the earth, Nathaniel?"

"Oh! Ugh-huh? Round," says Nat, just barely waking up.

"How do you know it's round?" demands Miss Baker.

"All right," says Nat. "It's square, then. I don't mean to argue about it!"

"Aw, I never!" cried Nat, as the others shouted their appreciation of the story. "That's just one of Ned's yarns."

With similar "carryings-on" they lightened the rough way to the sawmill camp. The last mile they had to walk, leaving the *Firebird* at a farmer's place. There was no such thing as taking the automobile to the camp.

"I hope Tom Moran is here," said Dorothy, again and again, to her friend, Tavia. "But I feel as though we were due to have another disappointment."

"Oh, I hope not," groaned Tavia.

The boys would not keep to the wood road, but scrambled over stumps and brambles, raising the hue and cry after timid rabbits,

starting an old cock partridge now and then, and chasing chipmunks along the fences.

"I'd love to have a woodchuck bake," Abe Perriton said. "The kids say they've found several woodchuck holes up near the Rouse place."

"Joe and Roger, you mean?" asked Dorothy, to whom Abe was speaking.

"And Octavia's brother Jack. Yes. Those kids would find woodchucks if there were any in the county. M-m-m! did you ever eat woodchuck, Tavia?"

"Sure I did. But I never expect to enjoy a woodchuck bake again. I'm grown up now," called Tavia, from her position in the lead with Bob Niles.

"If the kids really have found the holes—and Mr. Woodchuck is home," said Abe, "we might have a picnic, even if it is cold weather —say day after to-morrow."

"Nice weather for a picnic," laughed Dorothy. "See! there's still some snow in the fence corners."

"And the groundhogs will be as poor as Job's turkey," said Tavia, who understood about such things better, even, than a boy.

"Hurrah! there's the mill," shouted Nat.

The whine of the saw as it cut through a log floated down to them through the aisles of the wood. They hurried to reach their destination.

The saw was flying and the few men about the mill were working speedily. Mr. Polk himself, whom they knew by sight, was dragging a

huge log out of the water by the aid of a chain and a small engine. But nowhere in sight was "that redhead."

"Hello, Abe Perriton!" shouted the master of the mill. "Your father going to send that gang? Or are you huskies—and the little ladies—goin' to roll logs for me?"

"I guess father will send along men. But we'll roll *that* one for you, Mr. Polk," laughed Abe, as the huge log came up the runway to the mill.

The boys grabbed canthooks and helped put the log in place upon the carriage. The girls looked on with interest, for the working of a sawmill with a disk-saw of this size is not uninteresting.

"But that log's got a hollow in it, Mr. Polk," advised Tavia, the sharp-eyed.

"I know it, Miss. But the grain of the wood's so straight, and the hollow's so small, that I believe we're going to get some mighty fine planks out of it, just the same," replied the sawyer.

"Ask him about Tom Moran," begged Dorothy, *sotto-voce*.

"Just wait till he gets this log on the carriage. Now it goes!" exclaimed the interested Tavia.

The saw struck the hollow place the first clip, the outside slab was cut off, and out of the hollow flopped something that made the girls scream.

"A snake!" gasped Dorothy.

"Maybe it's an eel," said Tavia.

But quick-eyed Nat jumped for it and held up the flopping creature. It was a beautiful brook trout more than two feet long.

"Great find, boy!" declared Mr. Polk. "The law ain't off until April first; but I reckon that's your kill."

"We'll have the picnic, anyway!" laughed Bob Niles. "I bet trout baked in the ashes beats woodchuck all to pieces!"

Dorothy had come close to the sawyer now and tapped him on the arm.

"Oh, sir!" she exclaimed. "Isn't Tom Moran here with you?"

Polk's face clouded. "The red-haired rascal wouldn't stay. He don't like sawmill work. He worked for me yesterday and started in this morning; but an hour before you came he lit out."

"Gone?" gasped Dorothy.

"Yes, ma'am!"

"And you don't know where he's gone?" broke in Tavia.

"Couldn't tell ye," said Polk. "He lit out—walkin'—toward Pollinary. But that's twenty mile from here. Dunno as he'll go that far."

CHAPTER XXIV

"ALIAS JOHN SMITH"

THE wood smoke curled up in a spiral from the side of a big, rotting log where Nat had settled on the camp. The *Firebird* stood beside the narrow road with the lunch board spread, and Ned and Abe were diligently making ready the picnic repast, of which the seven pound trout and a half-peck of potatoes, bought of a farmer, were the main viands.

But how good it all did smell! The girls had appetites equal to the boys' own. And although Dorothy and Tavia were deeply disappointed in their search for Tom Moran, they "threw aside carking care," as Nat said, for the time being.

"For there is another day coming, Dot!" he declared. "A man with a head as red as that fellow's cannot be lost for long—no, indeed!"

"Cheerful soul, is Nattie," jollied Ned. "He always was hopeful. 'Member when you were fishing in the bathtub that time, kid?"

"What time?" demanded his brother, suspecting one of Edward's jokes.

"You know—when mother asked you what you expected to catch? And says you: 'Pollyglubs.'

"What *is* a pollyglub?" says the mater, and you handed her back a hot one.

"Oh, I did?" grunted Nat. "Don't remember it. What did I say?"

"Why, says you: 'Don't know; I haven't caught one yet.' Oh, you couldn't beat Nattie for hopefulness. He was one sanguine kid," laughed Ned. Bob slapped Nat on the back at that and rolled him over on a dry bit of sod where they wrestled for a few minutes—until Ned yelled for help at the campfire. Soon all six of the young folk were busy discussing the luncheon.

"This is really the nicest meal I've eaten since we were in camp—eh, Doro?" asked Tavia.

"I believe you, dear," admitted her friend.

But Dorothy could not be very enthusiastic. Her disappointment over missing Tom Moran was keen. And she was not much fun that night when the boys all came over to Tavia's for a "sing" and a general good time. *Her* mind was fixed upon the watch-and-watch they were to keep upon the general delivery window of the post-office the next day.

Joe demanded the privilege of being the first "man on duty." He was deeply interested in the Tom Moran conspiracy, as he insisted upon calling it because he admired Dorothy so, and because his boyish heart and sense of chivalry had been touched by the story of little Celia, "the findling."

"If this chap who's written to you, Doro," said Joe, with decided appreciation of the situation, "is in communication with Tom Moran, maybe we can catch Celia's brother before he gets any farther away from Dalton."

"But he's going farther away all the time, it seems," sighed Dorothy. "And up there beyond Polk's mill is a wild country."

Young Joe went off after an early breakfast in Tavia's kitchen, full of importance. He was to stand guard at the post-office window until

ten o'clock, or until one of the other boys, or Dorothy or Tavia, relieved him.

The signal agreed upon with the mail-clerk was a newspaper dropped through the opening after the person calling for "John Smith's" letter turned away. Joe served his time patiently, and nothing happened. Nat White lounged down, entered the post-office corridor, tweaked Joe's ear, and sent him off about his business.

"Johnny Travers and Rogue are waiting for you to go woodchucking," Nat told his cousin. "Off with you!"

Dorothy took her own luncheon early, and drifted into the post-office about one o'clock. Tavia was to join her later.

"Never did think you'd come," groaned Nat. "I'm starved to death."

"No sign of the Mystery yet?" breathed Dorothy.

"Nary a sign. I'm off! Good luck."

And if finding the mysterious "John Smith" was sure enough good luck, Dorothy could consider herself fortunate within half an hour. A lanky, hesitating youth approached the general delivery window. Twice he stepped back and allowed other people to get in front of him. Somehow Dorothy's attention was particularly attracted to the nondescript's face.

He might have been seventeen—perhaps older. There was a little yellow fuzz on his cheeks and chin, showing that his blonde beard was sprouting early. He was possessed of sharp features and a high and narrow forehead, prominent, watery blue eyes, and scarcely a vestige of eyebrows or lashes. This lack in the upper part of his face gave him a blank appearance—like the end wall of a house with two shutterless windows in it.

Below his countenance was quite as unattractive. In the first place he had a retreating, weak chin, prominent upper teeth, and an enormous Adam's apple. He was evidently nervous, or bashful. Dorothy saw him swallow several times before he could speak to the clerk inside the window. And when he swallowed, that bunch in his throat went up and down in a most ridiculous way.

"What did you say the name was?" Dorothy heard the mail clerk ask.

The shambling youth repeated it: "John Smith. Mis-ter John Smith. Yes, sir. Thank ye, sir."

The boy backed away with something white in his hand which Dorothy knew to be her letter. A newspaper, pushed through the window, fluttered to the floor of the corridor. But Dorothy was already going out of the post-office.

The youth followed her out. The letter had been put away somewhere in his skimpy clothing; for it must be admitted that not a garment visible on the stranger seemed to fit him.

Either his trousers, and coat, and vest, had been intended for a much smaller youth, or he was growing so fast that he could not wear a suit out before wrists, ankles, and neck were thrust through their several openings in the clothes in a most ridiculous fashion.

"I never saw such a funny-looking creature," Dorothy told herself, as she watched the boy from across the street. "And I don't remember ever having seen him in Dalton before. He looks ignorant enough to have written that letter I received, too; and yet—there is an innocent look about his face. I wonder if he really has intelligence enough to fix up any scheme to make money out of those who wish to find Tom Moran?"

The boy dawdled along the street and Dorothy walked on the other side, looking into shop windows now and then, but unfailing in

her vigilance. She did not let the shambling youth out of her line of vision; and especially was she watchful when he passed close to any other person.

Nobody spoke to him; he seemed quite unknown in the town. He drifted down toward the railroad yards where—in two or three mean streets—the poorer and most shiftless denizens of Dalton resided.

Down here was an open lot on which much of the refuse of the town was dumped to fill in a yawning gully. Ashes and piles of cans, and boxes and the like, offered to the poorer children a playground most amusing, if not conducive to health. At one corner two or three shacks—incongruous huts they were—had been constructed. Certain squatters evidently had taken up their abode in these, despite the still cool weather.

Lengths of rusty stovepipes were thrust through the side walls of these huts. The roofs were made of oil cans, unsoldered, and beaten flat, the sheets overlapping one another. Doors wabbled on leather hinges. A broken window was plugged up with an old silk hat.



"I'D VERY MUCH LIKE TO KNOW YOUR
NAME," SAID DOROTHY.

Dorothy Dale's Promise. *Page 207.*

Dorothy felt a shiver as she ventured further into the bad section of the town; but she was determined to learn something more of the

boy who had received the letter addressed to "John Smith" from the post-office.

He crossed the open lot, aiming without doubt for the squalid huts. Dorothy quickened her steps and remained on the sidewalk, following the line of the open square. She reached the corner nearest to the huts just as the youth strolled out of the open gully and to the side of the nearest shack.

There, sitting upon an overturned tub, barefooted, and dressed in coarse petticoat and blouse, was a hatless woman picking over a mess of greens in a rusty dishpan.

"Wa-al! I wanter know, Poke!" she drawled, looking up at the shambling youth. "Y' don't mean ter say you've got back?"

"Ye din't tell me ter run," said the young fellow, dropping down upon a broken box beside her.

"Wal! Plague take it! you air the laziest— Good afternoon, Ma'am! Was you wantin' anything?"

This last question was directed at Dorothy. The girl, quite thoughtless in her excitement, had crossed the street and stood before the woman and the youth.

"I—I— Oh! I'd very much like to know your name," said Dorothy, rather confused.

"Huh? Y' got some pertic'lar reason for findin' out, Miss?"

"Perhaps," and Dorothy began to look at the woman more calmly.

"I ain't none ashamed of it. It's Daggett. Jane Daggett. And this is my boy, Poke Daggett."

"You never were called Smith, I suppose?" queried Dorothy, quickly.

"Smith?" the woman exclaimed, and although she did not change color—she was too sallow for that—her little black eyes brightened perceptibly. "No. I can't say I ever was. Daggett was my secon' husban'; but I never married a Smith, an' my own name—'fore I married a-tall—was Blinkensopp. Now, air you satisfied, Miss?"

"Not wholly," Dorothy said, with courage. "If your name is not Smith, and your son's name is not Smith, why did he just get a letter from the post-office addressed to Mr. John Smith?"

The boy, Poke, jumped; indeed, he almost fell off the box. His mother pinched him sharply in the leg.

"Dunno what ye mean, lady," she whined. "Poke ain't never got a letter in his life—I don't believe. Has you, Poke?"

"I—I never!" gasped Poke, the lie showing plainly in his face.

"You have a letter somewhere in your pocket now," accused Dorothy, looking at the youth directly. "Don't deny it. I wrote it myself, so I should know. And," she added, wheeling on the mother, who had risen and let the greens slip from her lap, "I want to know what *you* know about Tom Moran?"

"Tom Moran?" whispered the boy, shaking his head, and looking terrified.

But the woman wasn't like that. She was a hard, bony-looking woman, and very tall and strong. While Dorothy was speaking she had beckoned to a black-haired, red-faced woman who stood curiously a little distance away.

"What's wanted, Jane?" demanded this virago, coming forward.

"Here's a poor gal out o' her senses, I make no doubt," said the woman who owned the name of Jane Daggett. "She—she's firm' off her mouth too much—that's what she's doin'. Sech folks oughter be restrained—"

"An' we'll restrain 'em!" declared the black-haired woman, and the next instant she seized Dorothy by the shoulders and ran into the open door of the hut.

Both women were in the shack with the girl, and the door was closed, before Dorothy could even scream.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WOODCHUCK HUNT

"Now, I got it all fixed, Tavia. You come along with us and see the fun," said Joe Dale, at luncheon time. "I'm sorry Dorothy's gone over to the post-office. She won't find anything, I'm afraid. Nobody came there this morning when *I* was on watch," he added, as though that was conclusive.

"But she will expect me——"

"No, she won't. Bob and Ned are going there right after two o'clock, they say, and they'll take her place."

"If Bob Niles is going there I don't want to go," said Tavia, with a toss of her head. "He's getting too—numerous."

"Come on with us and hunt woodchucks. We got the holes all marked this morning," said her brother Johnny. "And Rogue's got a turtle—a real snappy one, if it *is* so early in the spring."

"A turtle?" asked Tavia, wonderingly. "What do you do with a turtle catching woodchucks?"

"Oh, you'll see," promised Joe. "Come on."

And Tavia, who was just *crazy* to run wild in the woods and fields again, as she herself said, was over-ruled and went with the boys.

They went up into the fields near the Rouse farm. Had they gone by the way of the railroad crossing they might have passed "the Dump," as the open lot was called, just about the time Dorothy was talking with Jane Daggett and her hopeful son.

But Tavia and the boys—all Dorothy's friends, in fact—were quite unaware of the trouble into which Dorothy's impetuosity had gotten her.

The old pasture in which the boys had discovered the woodchuck burrows was full of sheltering clumps of dwarfed trees, and piles of stone. A woodchuck always has two openings to his home, and unless a watch is set at both holes no amount of smoking out will enable the hunter to grab Mr. Woodchuck.

"But we got it cinched!" declared Joe Dale, with excitement. "See this old mud turtle?"

The turtle produced was as large as the bottom of a two-quart pail. Tavia, who knew lots about snaring and trapping small game, was frankly puzzled over the use to which the turtle was to be put.

"Now you'll see," giggled her brother. "And we ain't goin' to hurt the turtle a mite. Pull out his tail, Joe."

"Yes, pull out his tail, brother," urged Roger, dancing around the group that hovered about one of the doors to Mr. Woodchuck's den.

"Isn't a turtle funny?" laughed Tavia. "He sits down, swallows his head, and puts both his hands and feet in his pockets."

"Now the string," said Joe, seriously. He tied a piece of stout cord to the creature's tail.

"It'll slip," objected Johnny.

"No, 'twon't!"

"Give me the wire, Rogue," commanded Johnny.

The younger lad produced a piece of thin wire about two feet in length. At one end was a loop, and to this the bit of stout cord was fastened. Then, to the other end of the wire, Johnny attached a ball of cotton. Joe produced a bottle of coal oil.

"Whatever are you horrid boys going to do?" demanded Tavia, suddenly.

"Now, we're not going to hurt the turtle," explained her brother, calmly. "You needn't fret. We're going to get and bake Mr. Woodchuck. He's proper game. Mr. Turtle may be scared for a minute, or two, but that's all. He is a cold-blooded insect——"

"Insect! hear to him!" burst out Joe Dale, laughing uproariously.

"Oh—ah-ugh! I mean reptile," grunted Johnny.

"That's as bad as one of the fellows in school," said Roger. "Teacher asked him what an oyster was, and he told her it was a fish built like a nut."

"Goody!" chuckled Tavia. "So it is. But do you think this cold-blooded reptile—which is also a good deal like a nut—needs warming up, boys?"

"We won't warm him," explained Johnny. "Don't you see we've got the wire tied to his tail with a piece of string? If the wire should get hot *he'd* never feel it. Now come on, Joe. Pour on the oil. You watching that other hole, Rogue? We don't want the old groundhog to fool us."

"He hasn't poked his snout out here yet," declared the smallest boy, with confidence.

But Tavia, who had begun to look worried, suddenly interfered.

"Say! I want to know," she demanded, "wherever you boys learned to smoke a woodchuck out in this way? It's not nice. I don't like it—"

"Aw, listen to her!" ejaculated Johnny Travers. "Don't be a softie, Tavia."

"I tell you it doesn't hurt the turtle," said Joe Dale.

"I don't care," said Tavia, warmly. "Even if it only *looks* as though it might hurt him, we shouldn't do it. We shouldn't even be willing to stand for animals *appearing* to be hurt. It's not nice—it's not kindly —"

"Aw, shucks!" began her brother again; but Joe shut him up quickly:

"That's all right, Jack. If Tavia says we're not to do it, we won't. Let him go," and in a moment he had released the reptile, which began crawling off desperately as though he knew just how narrow an escape he had had from becoming an animated torch.

For a minute or two Johnny was inclined to pout. But Tavia (who knew as much about woodchuck hunting as the boys themselves) quickly made a brush torch, and they saturated that with oil, touched it off with a match, and pushed it down the woodchuck hole.

There was a big stack of corn fodder near at hand; but the interested young folk did not pay much attention to it at the moment. They did not even observe a certain rustling in the fodder when they first came to the woodchuck burrow; nor did they see a pair of very bright eyes, belonging to a young man with very red hair, that peered out at them when they began smoking out the denizen of the hole in the hillside. This red-haired person only grinned at them and then lay down for another nap in the fodder. He was laying up sleep for the coming night, for he expected to "jump"

the fast freight to the West that passed through Dalton at midnight, and only stopped at the water-tank below this hill.

The three boys and Tavia waited at the other end of the woodchuck burrow.

"If he doesn't get heart-failure, or apoplexy, or something like that, Mr. Woodchuck will run out in about two shakes of a lamb's tail," chuckled Johnny Travers.

"Your lamb has an awful long tail, Johnny," quoth his sister, teasingly, after a minute or so.

And then she suddenly joined the boys in a whoop of excitement. The nose of the woodchuck appeared. Little Rogue hit it a crack and the creature didn't run far. But Johnny waited with uplifted "whanger" and there appeared a second woodchuck. They got that one, too—and both were pretty plump, for all that they had been hived up during the winter.

"We've got enough for a bake—a small one," said Roger.

"Aw, wait," said his brother. "There's another hole. Come on, Johnny! Let's make a new torch."

Johnny obeyed and Joe led the way around the stack. There were signs of another woodchuck hollow. They repeated the performance with the torch here, and then grouped about the other outlet to welcome the groundhog when he appeared.

In ten minutes they had a third fat carcass, and the boys began to skin and clean them.

"Nat was laughing at us," said Joe Dale. "I reckon he and Cousin Ned will be glad enough to eat some of these fellows."

"Faugh! you wouldn't really eat 'em?" began Tavia. But the boys laughed uproariously.

"Ain't that just like a girl?" cried Johnny. "Woodchuck is as good eating as 'possum, or coon, or squirrel."

"That's all right," laughed Tavia, tossing her head. "Everybody to their taste, as the old woman said when she kissed her cow. I'll choose squirrel—and I reckon Doro will, too—and the bigger boys. And I know where we can get some, for there's no law on squirrels in this county. We'll have some potatoes in the bake, too."

"Goody!" cried Roger, jumping around. "It takes girls to think of the fixin's."

"That's so," agreed Johnny, getting over his little grouch.

"And let's have the bake in Griscom's grove—you know—back of the old schoolhouse; there's a fine place there. Don't you remember, Johnny?"

"Of course," said her brother. "There's plenty of stones there for an oven. And——"

"Oh, oh, oh!" screamed Tavia, suddenly.

"Whatever became of that torch, Rogue?" demanded Joe.

It was too late, however, to wonder about that. One side of the stack of fodder was all ablaze.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE FIERY FURNACE

DOROTHY was not likely to scream—not just at the moment she was thrust into the old shack by her two vigorous captors. For the black-haired woman clapped her dirty palm right over the girl's mouth, hissing into her ear meanwhile:

"Let a squawk out o' ye, me foine lady, and I'll choke it back inter yer throat like a cork-stopper. Understand me, now?"

Dorothy nodded. Although she was greatly startled, she was not so frightened that she could not think clearly. What would these women make by trying to hold her captive here, so near a public street? Surely they would not really injure her if she obeyed them.

"Easy, dear," urged the light-haired woman, who confessed to the name of Jane Daggett. "We won't hurt a hair of her head—but that hat—"

She tore the pretty hat Dorothy wore from her head. Then off came the girl's jacket. Jane Daggett spied the watch Dorothy carried.

"The jewelry's too much for the likes of her," she said, grinning. "And there's her ring."

The black-haired woman tore the ring from Dorothy's finger. "That's *my* share, Jane," she said. "Don't you be a pig, my dear."

"Sure we'll share an' share alike," replied Jane Daggett, grimly. "Take off your dress, my dear," she commanded Dorothy. "It's too good for ye. I'll give ye one o' me own. It may be a mite too big for ye; but ye'll grow to it," and she chuckled at her own witticism.

"Oh, please!" gasped Dorothy, now freed from the bigger woman's hand.

"Hush up!" ordered the black-haired virago.

"She's got a pretty purse, too," laughed Jane Daggett, dragging the article from the coat pocket.

Dorothy could not help crying a little. She dared not make a loud noise, for she saw that the rougher woman would instantly strangle her if she did so. But she would not unbutton her dress.

"You'd better mind!" hissed the black-haired woman, in a low voice. "You'd better——"

The unuttered threat made Dorothy tremble violently. She felt as though she would faint. Things began to turn black around her. The hideous, grinning faces of her two captors swam before her gaze——

Suddenly there came a pounding on the wall of the shack. "Hush!" cried Jane Daggett.

"What's that?" whispered the other woman.

"My Poke. What's th' matter, Poke?"

"Cheese it! Here's some fellers——"

The drawling voice of the young man who had got the letter at the post-office ceased. The next instant Dorothy heard the cheerful voice of Ned White, her big cousin:

"Hullo, you! Didn't a pretty girl just go past here—a girl with red in her hat and a tan coat?"

"Don't know nothin' erbout no gal," drawled Poke Daggett.

Now, Poke was naturally a coward. His lantern features likely showed that he was telling a falsehood, too. Bob Niles' voice interposed:

"You've got good eyes, young fellow. You saw Miss Dale all right. Which way did she go?"

"Ain't seen no gal," drawled Poke.

Jane Daggett had Dorothy by one arm. Her lean fingers were bruising the tender flesh warningly. On the other side stood the black-haired woman with a piece of plank held threateningly to strike. Dorothy could see nails in that plank—if the woman used it, her face would be lacerated!

"Hul-*lo!*" exclaimed Ned's voice, suddenly.

"Handkerchief, by Jove!" cried Bob.

"It's Dorothy's, too! This rascal——"

There was a sudden spurning of the gravel. Poke, lazy as he was, had begun to run. With a shout Bob leaped away after him.

But Ned turned toward the closed cabin door. The wadded-up handkerchief had dropped from the cuff of Dorothy's coat just as she was being pushed inside. It was off the sidewalk, and Ned's brain worked quickly.

"Come back here, Bob!" he yelled. "He's only putting us off the scent. *Here she is!*"

In a moment Ned burst into the shack. Jane Daggett dodged and ran out. The black-haired virago aimed a blow at Ned's head with the plank, but missed him by a hair's breadth.

"Look out! Look out!" cried Dorothy, sinking into a corner, out of the way.

"Oh, I'd give a dollar if you were a man for a minute!" exclaimed Ned, stepping around the woman to dodge her blows, but having to stand her coarse vituperations.

Bob came back with a whoop. The woman dodged out and disappeared up the gully on the trail of Jane Daggett. Dorothy's hat, coat, watch, purse and ring went with them.

"They've robbed and beaten you, Dot," cried Ned, beside himself with rage. "Oh! if they'd only been men so we could hit 'em."

"Well, now," began Bob, when Dorothy panted:

"There's the boy, Ned. Let's catch him. Never mind my things. That boy got the letter and he knows about Tom Moran, I am sure."

"He's crossed the tracks," said Bob. "If you hadn't called me back, Ned, I'd had him."

"We'll get him yet," declared Ned. "Come on."

He took his cousin's hand. Bob seized Dorothy's other hand and she ran between them, down across the railroad tracks and up the hill. They were going toward Rouse's farm. They saw the lanky, white-haired youth climbing the heights above them.

Suddenly smoke and fire burst out at a point in the upper pasture far from Simeon Rouse's house. It was a fodder stack afire, and Dorothy and the two boys saw several figures running about it.

The path over the upland which Poke Daggett followed led him right past the fired stack of corn fodder. Ned and Dorothy both saw this.

"Leave me behind, boys—do," she gasped. "You can overtake him and I can't."

"Isn't that Tavia?" demanded Bob Niles. "It *is* she, I'm sure."

"And the boys," cried Dorothy. "Tell them to stop him, Ned!"

Ned White raised his voice in a great whoop. He waved his hands and pointed to the running Daggett. The latter was almost up to the stack of burning fodder.

It was Tavia's quick mind that understood Ned's yells and gestures. She sprang straight into the path of the white-haired youth. He dodged her, but came to his knees. Joe and Johnny, well up in football tactics, tackled low and brought the fellow down again before he had fairly regained his feet.

"That's it! Hold him!" whooped Bob and Ned.

They left Dorothy behind as they clambered up the rough hillside. The staggering Daggett put forth the last ounce of his faint strength. He rose up, threw off the two smaller boys, and started on.

And just then a new actor appeared in the field—and a most astonishing one. A yell of fright sounded, and there sprang out of the fodder stack—seemingly from the very heart of the fire—a figure wreathed by smoke and sparks. Indeed, the man's clothing was afire at several points.

But most striking of all, his hair was the reddest of the red, and his freckles stood out prominently on the background of his pale skin.

"Fire! Fire," he roared. "Who's tr-ryin' to burn me up? Wow! is that you, Poke Daggett?"

He whirled right into the flying Daggett's arms. He had been trying to beat out the sparks upon his clothing, and as he collided with Poke, the two went to the ground.

"It—it's that redhead!" gasped Tavia. "Oh, it's surely Tom Moran!"

Joe and Johnny—and even little Roger Dale—ran to assist in putting out the fire in the red-haired man's clothing. Poke Daggett rose and tried to drag himself away.

But Ned and Bob arrived, and the former ordered young Daggett to stop. "We've got a bone to pick with you, you white-haired rascal. Wait! Isn't your name Moran?" he asked of the man who had been afire.

"I don't know—they woke me up so quick," returned the red-headed one, with a grin. "However did these kids set the fodder afire? Somebody will have to pay Simeon Rouse for it."

"We'll 'tend to that," returned Ned, quickly. "But Miss Dale is very anxious to meet you."

"Meet me?" asked Tom Moran, for it was he. "About that runaway the other day? I'm mighty sorry the steers ran—"

"That's not it," said Tavia, briskly. "It's about your sister Celia, and Miss Olaine, and—"

Tom Moran's face changed instantly. He forgot all about Poke, who would have crept away had not Bob taken a turn in his jacket collar and held the fellow prisoner.

"I guess you're saying something now, Miss," said Moran, gravely. "What do you know about my little sister? I've been hunting for her

a long time. And the other person you speak of——”

Then Dorothy arrived and, as Tavia said, “the court of inquiry went into executive session.”

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